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SUBJECT: BEYWATCH - NEWS FROM TUNISIA AT THE END OF 2005

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¶1. The following is one of a series of reporting cables drafted predominantly by Post's entry level officers, which have the "Beywatch" caption. We believe the different perspectives offered in each of the following vignettes will give the reader a look into everyday life in Tunisia that may not be central to more formal reporting. For more information about Tunisia or the Embassy Tunis Entry Level Officer Development initiative, see our Siprnet website.

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Moderate Tunisia is "middle-of-the-road" in driving, too

¶2. While Tunisia is developed in many respects, it can be much less so in others. The roads are paved and well maintained, with directional signs and traffic lights at every corner. One might say there are more road signs, traffic lights and traffic circles than there are people on Tunis' roads. Recently these roads were beautified with thousands of newly-planted palm trees, and road-side buildings were given a fresh coat of paint in preparation for the U.N. World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) held in Tunis in mid-November.

¶3. Although Tunisia enjoys good roads, drivers can be careless and dangerous. And although it is common to bemoan driving practices across the Middle-East, there is one particular habit unique to Tunisian drivers -- almost all Tunisians drive over the line dividing lanes as if not to let anyone pass them on either side of the road. One can never tell if the driver in front of you is keeping to the left or meaning to go right, which slows traffic for everyone behind. All drivers constantly accommodate slower moving mopeds, cycles, donkey carts and the occasional camel. While major intersections are supervised by traffic police, the officer often stands in the middle of the intersection in such a way that he or she cannot see the traffic lights. There is no thrill like the thrill of hurling down the roadway at 100km/h towards a green light only to have to stop short because a policeman hidden in the center of the road has raised his hand to signal everyone to stop. Clearly with limited

visibility, the officer and the lights are rarely coordinated.

14. Driving, during the November U.N. World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) event, by contrast, was delightful, with traffic practically non-existent. The Ministry of Interior turned off traffic lights on certain roadways, closed other roads altogether and created special traffic lanes for vehicles marked for WSIS. This could have been the precursor to Tunisia's first HOV lane, but as soon as WSIS ended, so did the restricted lanes. Another factor which helped lighten road traffic during the summit was the closing of schools and government offices.

15. Driving schools are plentiful in Tunis, and student drivers are everywhere, adding yet another challenge to an already difficult driving environment. But Tunisians, like drivers in other countries, ignore common-sense road rules. For example, it is not unusual to see drivers stop their cars on the road to vent frustration to some other driver for some perceived traffic slight. They are also fond of creating extra lanes at traffic lights, in an attempt to "creep" to the front of the line, and get through the intersection as one of the lead cars. What cachet the driver acquires for being the first to cross the intersection on the first blink of green is not clear, but it is nevertheless common, as is a slight honk from rear drivers the second the light turns green. And finally, any discussion of driving in Tunisia must include at least one parting shot about the pedestrians in the roadways. These are not only the children one must constantly watch for, but also the adults walking on dark streets on dark nights in dark clothes. Taken together, these various elements form a challenging environment for the best of drivers. But when coupled with "middle-of-the-road" driving skills and etiquette, the challenge becomes even

greater.

Digital Divide Sculpture Commemorates WSIS

16. Opinions are divided on the artistic merit of the new sculpture outside the Le Kram Exposition Center, the compound where the WSIS summit was held. In early 2005, the GOT decided to set aside 350,000 TD (\$256,485.45 USD) to commemorate the summit with a sculpture. In April the GOT held a national contest for art students, architects, and engineers to develop an edifice that would symbolize the theme, "The Digital Divide between the North and South." From a group of around 25 contestants, 5 finalists were chosen to present their ideas to a panel of the COMSI (WSIS organizational committee). However, the final winner was actually the choice of President Ben Ali. The monument is the creation of artist Abdelmajid Jenhani and architect Samir Bellagi.

17. The sculpture is a treated iron structure covered with an aluminum casing, and appears on the traffic circle in front of the exposition center. It is composed of two intersecting isosceles triangles supporting a globe in their crux, where the globe, according to architect Bellagi, symbolizes "all the civilizations and cultures in the world." Bellagi told Emboff that the longer triangle represents the North, and the shorter triangle, which pierces the north in its side, represents the South. At the very tips of the triangles are yellow lights symbolizing "progress." At night, the entire structure is lit from within, and is illuminated by external spotlights around the concrete base. The triangles' main sides have colored stripes, separated by dotted white lights, which represent "the highways of information," and the transparent slim sides of the triangles represent "transparency." An article in Tunisian daily La Presse stated that the colors of the stripes represented "cultural diversity," but Bellagi said that this was a bit of artistic license on the part of the journalist. In actuality, he said

he just picked out colored panels that looked good, and tried to get them close to the colors of the WSIS logo. The panels are made from polycarbonate imported from Canada, but all remaining materials were sourced from Tunisian suppliers.

¶8. After Jenhani and Bellagi won the commission, they "technically" commenced work on the project on 05/05/05 at 5:00pm, which Bellagi considered a lucky portent for the start of the project. However, it took 44 meetings, from May to September, to secure all the approvals necessary to actually begin any physical work on the structure itself. During this deliberation period, the project's budget was cut to 250,000 TD, (\$183,453 USD) and the longer, northern triangle decreased from 20 meters in length to 11 meters, its current size, as the structure shrunk to fit the new budget. Also gone was a reflecting pool for a base, which represented "transparency" in the original design.

¶9. Once approvals were finally secured, they had two months to build the structure, from September to November. At this point, they had to find a company willing to build the structure within the budget and time restrictions. Most vendors approached by the amiable architect turned down the work because of the tight time frame for construction. Several also voiced the fear of too much "presidential visibility" in the case of failure. However, one construction company, Afrique Metal, took the contract and assembled a team of civil engineers, electrical engineers, metallic construction workers, and landscaping crews. During the initial excavation for the structure's base, the work had to stop briefly when they hit an old road under the traffic circle. This road dated back to the French colonization period, sometime before Tunisia's independence in 1956. However, this did not stop the project, and workers, using bright construction lights, worked day and night on the giant structure. Work was completed on November 1, 2005. President Ben Ali was present on November 14, 2005 to inaugurate the structure, two days before the opening session of the WSIS summit, which ran from November 16-18, 2005. There is a marble plaque on the concrete base which commemorates the occasion. Ben Ali's comments were that the sculpture was "grandiose, a giant."

¶10. Even with all the challenges, the project was completed on time, and even under budget. The total cost for the construction was 198,504.449 TD (USD \$145,970). The artistic studies and architect's fees were 29,920 TD (USD \$22,002). To date, the construction company has been paid -- but not the artist and architect. However, Bellagi, with a sheepish grin, said "I am still hopeful I will be paid someday."

Why are Muslim Tunisians celebrating Christmas?

¶11. All throughout the month of December in Tunisia, it could truly be said "it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas." For westerners, that can be somewhat surprising, considering the country is approximately 98% Muslim, with an estimated 1% Christian population. Nevertheless, signs of Christmas could be seen in many places, even more than evident in 2004. There were store windows decorated with Christmas trees, bakeries selling Yule logs, and even Christmas lights on traffic circles put up by the GOT. The large supermarket in Tunis, Carrefour, had a fairly large section devoted to Christmas decorations, and Embassy staff in country for the past several years have watched this section get larger and larger with each passing year.

¶12. Sales of Christmas items are not for the expatriate community only. Local Embassy staff, as well as local Tunisian commercial establishments, put up trees and decorated offices. Tunisians even put up decorations, including trees with lights and ornaments in their homes. The exchange of small gifts was also welcomed, and somewhat expected, particularly at our annual Embassy office Christmas party. And finally, many Embassy staff received holiday

cards from Tunisians this year, both at home and office addresses. This Embassy officer received a card from a Tunisian architect, who lives outside the capital, with a Christmas ornament in glitter on the cover. Inside, the greeting was for a "happy new year," but the Christmas-like design on the front of the card was unmistakable.

¶13. Where is this influence coming from, and why is not a conflict with traditional Muslim beliefs? The Tunisians take their western cultural cues from the French, who like Americans, consecrate the month of December to the celebration of Christmas. Also appealing are the more secular customs of Christmas, apart from the religious aspects of the holiday. They like the fact that it is a time to offer gifts, to get together for a family reunion, and to offer aid to the less fortunate. Since it is also common for Tunisians to secularize even Muslim holidays, it poses less of a moral problem to secularize an occidental holiday. Therefore, this officer predicts you can expect even more future appearances of "Papa Noel" in coming years.

HUDSON